

# When Lee's Men Failed to Fight

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**A**S FAR AS West Virginia of 1861 was concerned—General Robert E. Lee "should have stood home."

This month is Virginia Heritage Month, and Old Dominion observances begin with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Robert E. Lee. Some of this fervor is leaking into the Mountain State.

The Allegheny foothills were Lee's Noose, remnant of Napoleon's defeat and disaster at the prime of his career. But it brought the growing Southern commander a firsthand look at a war that was to bring both disaster and triumph to his star-shaped career.

First, he exploded the myth that "a Southern can beat ten Yankees." Here Lee saw his own southern braves retreat against orders to charge. He learned that a few glamor men set at war when soldiers began to desert and slip over the hill into the independent juntas.

Then, the wars of West Virginia drew Lee as though into the furnace at base of his mountain. Major John Washington and Capt. W. S. Garnett were killed. The last early point of the way. These were the most important battles in either side of war, because a confederate regular had a majority of the Southern general staff. And as the smoke died, Lee retreated down with millions of his men ready

who refused—or were reluctant—to obey official orders.

And General Lee got an insight into the nature of the mountain men who made up a large part of the Army of Northern Virginia. It is probably that such rough schooling in West Virginia gave Lee the experience that was to make him one of the most understanding and capable officers who have ever strode this continent.

GEN. ROBERT E. LEE came to West Virginia from Staunton, Va., having ridden the railroad that ran around the mountains where he had been sent to stop the tide of Northern invasion. Lee looked forward to the venture because his own son, Major Rooney Lee, was stationed here. Brig. Gen. R. S. Garnett had been sent to hold the Northerners from further advances, and Lee heard the news that the rebel armies in the hills were retreating—that they had abandoned Gratzon, opening the route to conquest of that entire area by the Yankees.

Lee first arrived in Hintersville, Pocahontas County, where he inspected a temporary hospital full of smallpox and measles victims. The roads were poor, and many of the people were hostile to the Confederates—not from particular Northern sympathies—but because of native Anglo-Saxon suspicion of any stranger. They were the people who had dropped off the first wagons and exploring parties when the country was settled. There were few slaves here, and most of the people reckoned a living from small farms.

THE FEDERALS held Cheat Mountain, sprawling their troops along the sides of the Greenbrier River. Gen. W. W. Loring, in command at Huntersville, was stalled and reluctant to make an attack as the enemy kept building stronger fortifications. Loring's timidity was losing the campaign at this point. Lee wisely failed in an attempt to urge the timid general into action, and he went on to Valley Mountain. Loring had shown no inclination to obey Lee, although was his superior. It was Lee's first experience with a disobedient general officer. He was learning.

The rains were making war more terrible here in the hills. Soldiers wrote home that the mud was so deep that moles "sank up to their ears" along the crooked dirt roads.

A few days later Lee had mapped out a plan to take Cheat Mountain. "A battle must come off, and I am anxious to begin it," he wrote home. Col. Albert Rust of Arkansas had asked that he be allowed to lead the column which was first to attack the blue-coats. The plan was to take Cheat Mountain and clear Tygart's Valley. For some strange reason, Rust completely froze when his order came, and he refused to make the attack he had insisted be his privilege. Thus, there the entire plan out of order. All the other officers were sulky and deaf of Lee's orders to get into the fight—and the battle plan completely flubbed as it was born. Lee might well have been a drummer boy for all the authority he commanded that day.

Lee's May... cont

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**LEE WROTE HOME:** "I can not tell you my regret and mortification at the hazardous venture you caused the failure of the plan I had taken every precaution to ensure success and counted on it. But the forces of the Union were equal otherwise. We are no worse off now than before."

He wrote Gov. Letcher of Virginia of his resolution with the western and the southern. But he added "please do not repeat of it; we must try again."

In Richmond, later, the battle plan was examined and many staff officers agreed that Lee would easily have taken West Virginia if his officers had recommended it. And it was later admitted that Col. Rost's intelligence had frightened him with tales that there were about 4,000 men lined up against him. Collier records show that Rost had 2,000 men and the enemy had but 200 that day. It would have been more or less successful had Lee not been unprepared and the great majority were not yet in line making.

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**WITH A HEAVY HEART,** Lee now went to South Mountain in Fayette County, where Gen. John B. Floyd was camped. The most important thing Lee did here was start his famous white beard. Prior to this time Lee had worn only a mustache. Anxiously, it all began because he lost his coat.

At Sewell, Lee was again disappointed. His officers were squabbling among themselves like children. He told one lieutenant, as he dressed him down for lack of information: "This is no keeping up with everything we I find

here-in order to accomplish something seems rather difficult. We are too independent to do our work and too apt to consider what we do. This will not do."

Meanwhile, the Federals with some minor losses took the Confederate fortifications. The capture of West Virginia was soon imminent to the Federals, but not so much to the Confederates. Lee had to make his way back. It may not have been necessary for the Confederates to do this, but much of the Army had to return to their State and Headquarters to it recommended the advantage to the group members.

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**LEE WAS HAPPY** in getting to Richmond, although he was glad out of the way. He was glad to get away from the constant noise of the Virginians. "We could hardly get a moment's respite," he said. "And sleep was impossible. The men ... the dogs ... the horses ... the ... . Men, if you come this far, you had better march on, or you would have been captured."

But Lee would not consider an immediate and simultaneous attack. Davis advised the Confederate South Carolina to cover it and enticeing Lee. "Lee would be pleased, without question, with that," Davis wrote. "That is the command to attack you and we were sending a general and thinking Lee would have done it."

There were better days ahead. Lee's first in in the trial of Davis today, but after the resounding campaign in West Virginia they were calling him "a noisy old man," a "historic name," and "Granny Lee."

He didn't have much fun in West Virginia.

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